



**FIRST
LIGHT**

To: Sen. Carney, Rep. Moonen, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
From: Ellie Oldach, Core Staff Member of First Light

Testimony in support of LD 2007, *An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations*

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Ellie Oldach and I live in Bar Harbor. I am submitting testimony as a staff member of First Light, a community project under the nonprofit organization New Learning Journey. As an organization, we stand in support of LD 2007.

First Light is a collective effort across more than 65 non-native land-holding organizations in the Wabanaki homelands now called Maine. We work closely with the federally-recognized Wabanaki Nations through our collaboration with the Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship. First Light's aim is to relearn the history of these lands, recenter Wabanaki voice and decision-making, and return land to Wabanaki Nations. Our work is coordinated by core staff and supported in innumerable ways by the time and energy of many Wabanaki and non-native partners. You can learn more about our community and our shared work at dawnlandreturn.org.

Ever since First Light began, we have heard consistently from Wabanaki partners about the importance of sovereignty, and the ways the 1980 Settlement Acts impinge on full Wabanaki sovereignty. The Settlement Acts bar Wabanaki Nations from the sovereign rights upheld for all other federally-recognized Tribes. They impose barriers on how Nations acquire and care for land and people. LD 2007 offers an overdue opportunity to open the way for full Wabanaki sovereignty. This is not just a benefit to Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet Nations directly affected by this bill; instead, recognizing the sovereign rights of Indigenous peoples is core to addressing the harms to humans and the environment from ongoing colonization. Wabanaki people have a long record of sustaining land-human relationships that allow future generations to thrive, one that is sorely needed in a time of rapid climate change. We believe that by restoring the full recognition of inherent Wabanaki sovereignty, we will see positive impacts both for Wabanaki Nations as well as non-native neighbors. This is borne out by local studies like the 2022 Kennedy School report that demonstrates the economic benefits of

restoring sovereignty, and global reviews like the 2019 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services that demonstrates the biodiversity benefits in Indigenous-stewarded lands (see references below). This bill will restore Wabanaki sovereignty around caring for land and people, and will benefit all in Maine, Wabanaki, non-native, and more-than-human alike.

The First Light community had its first opportunity to support Wabanaki-led changes to the Settlement Act in 2021, when LD 1626 went before Maine Congress. At that time, leaders from more than 30 organizations in the First Light community signed their support of legislation to fully recognize Wabanaki sovereignty. Since then, our community's commitment to actions that restore sovereignty to Wabanaki communities has grown. Conservation organizations in our community are offering land for return to Wabanaki Nations. Thirty-two organizations made unrestricted financial contributions to a fund for Wabanaki land relationship. Many organizations have joined the Wabanaki Alliance Coalition and are committed to following Wabanaki-led advocacy. This is just a sample of the work in solidarity our community is pursuing.

However, the work we do as a community needs to be supported by system-level changes to the legal platforms that structure our lives and interactions. While Wabanaki sovereignty is impinged by the Settlement Acts, full expression of Wabanaki land relationships isn't possible. In LD 2007, we see an opportunity for system-level change that can build the conditions for whole and healthy people and land across these Wabanaki homelands now known as Maine. We believe this work is the best way to build towards more livable, sustainable futures for all.

Thank you, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee, for your consideration. Please don't hesitate to reach out via dawnlandreturn.org, with any questions about First Light and our collaboration with Wabanaki Nations or any other follow-up on this important issue.

References:

Kalt, Medford, & Taylor (2022): Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions on the Applicability of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine. Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development Research Report.

<https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/economic-and-social-impacts-restrictions-applicability-federal-indian-policies>

IPBES (2019): Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). Media release: <https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment>